OSCE 2007 Mediterranean Seminar

(Tel Aviv, 18 – 19 December 2007)

**Combating Intolerance and Discrimination and
Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding**

Remarks by Ambassador Ömür Orhun, Personal Representative of the OSCE CiO on Combating Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims, at the Second Session on "Promoting Respect for Cultural and Religious Diversity and Facilitating Dialogue"

As the discussant of this session, which is a new innovation in this organization, I have been asked to make some comments on the speeches delivered, and to propose a few thought-provoking ideas for further discussion.

First of all, I think it would be appropriate to recall the main topic of this session, which is "promoting respect for cultural and religious diversity and facilitating dialogue", with special emphasis on the role of education and the media.

Within the scope of this general framework, we have just followed with interest four very well prepared presentations, covering different specific aspects of the issues under discussion. I have no intention, and for that matter neither can I accomplish in a satisfactory manner, to summarize or to underline the main points of these presentations. However, both earlier this morning and during our session a few concepts were underlined repeatedly. I now intend to share with the participants a few thoughts on these concepts, and then to try to raise some questions or issues for further debate.

Diversity: Many countries nowadays are facing the challenges of managing increasingly diverse and multicultural societies. The richness of such diversity encompass religious, racial and cultural aspects, which sometimes lead to social conflicts and even social violence.

On the other hand, what we observe in the international scene is increasing polarization, especially along cultural and religious lines.

These two trends, as I see it, must be addressed in conjunction with each other.

Mutual respect to, and not only respect but also sensitivity and knowledge of other cultures and religions both at the home front and at the inter-state relations is a must. Our able speakers have underlined this necessity in more detail. Cultural and convictional differences is a reality. This reality should not be designed in a divisive manner, but rather in an over-embracing fashion. In other words, as someone said earlier, isolation is no option.

Tolerance: Tolerance has been defined as the capacity for or as the practice of recognizing and respecting the practices and beliefs of others. In other words, tolerance is acceptance of differing views and fairness towards people who hold these differing views. Needless to say, acceptance of differing views does not necessarily entail identifying one's self with such views, but entails merely respecting them. In that regard, I would like to suggest that all present should have a new look at the UNESCO definition of what tolerance means and what it does not mean.

In order to promote tolerance, I believe an ethical and intellectual approach must be adopted. For that, a mutual and two-way understanding should be the starting point. (Here the key word is "mutual".) But understanding is not enough, there must also be knowledge.

What we should be seeking is not a call by a benevolent dictator or ruler to its subjects. What we have in front of us is two or more sides. In a contemporary and democratic society we can not speak about concessions or favours by the majority to the minority (or to the minorities/vulnerable groups).

What we should instead be seeking is respect and equal treatment and, as a distinguished speaker had stressed, equal opportunities. In other words, new avenues must be found, as someone mentioned earlier.

If we want to reach a consensus, on the other hand, some conditions must be met: Transparency and inclusivity comes as the first two "must"s. Additionally, our relationship(s) should be based on trust and equality of the members of the society should be respected. In other words, a comprehensive strategy of interaction must be adopted.

Dialogue: The final concept I wish to elaborate is dialogue, which is a most frequently used one, but sometimes in an empty manner. The first condition for a successful dialogue is that we should be talking to each other, but not across each other. Secondly, any dialogue must be peaceful and respectful. As previous speakers had said, we must give a new meaning to dialogue in a new environment and we must avoid selectice hearing.

Questions/Issues for Further Debate:

a)   It is said that 20th Century was dominated by politics of ideology, whereas 21st Century is (or will be) dominated by politics of identity. When politics turn from ideology to identity, the contradiction or contradistinction between "us" and "them" becomes more pronounced. (This is what we observe today.) In such an environment, how can we protect the "dignity of the individual" in an athmosphere of divergencies?

b)   In the past, diverse populations (of different religious, cultural or ethnic background) were subject to overarching (and somewhat authoritarian) state structures with the power to contain conflict. This is no more the case. Protecting human security has become more important than protecting or providing state security. In such an environment, how future conflicts (due to diversity of interests of various groups) can be contained and prevented?

c)   Is the maxim of "only those will be tolerated who are themselves tolerant" correct? Or, does such a definition deprives tolerance of any moral content, by making it completely dependent on the behaviour of others?

d)   Can "respect for diversity and tolerance" be legislated, or should we inculcate or instill them in all our fellow citizens as ethical principles? Or both?

e)   Are we shutting the gate long after the horse has bolted; I mean are we being reactive instead of proactive in view of manifestations of intolerance, discrimination and hate?

These are a few questions or issues that participants may wish to address.

Finally, I would like to say a few words on education and the media, the two main sub-headings of this session.

There is no doupt that both formal and informal education and awareness raising programmes are the key to preventing prejudices, streotypes and misinformation. To use the wise words of an earlier speaker, we must strive to lift the veil of ignorance.

In the field of education, a holistic approach is a must, encompassing all aspects, but not searching for piece-meal solutions. In that respect, education and training, both for the mainstream communities and for vulnerable groups/migrants/foreigners should be addressed covering the following areas:

a. Civic education, addressing issues of identity and fostering respect for diversity, also teaching under-priviliged groups of their rights. (In other words, education for living together and getting rid of identity vacuums.)

b. Cross-cultural education or history of humanity. (Inclusive education about the world and its peoples/cultures.)

c. Mother tongue education for migrants.

d. Media literacy training, exposure to electronic media.

e. Education about religions, also covering diverse religious beliefs.

f. Professional education, to expand opportunities; apprenticeship and training for employment.

g. Training for teachers, law enforcement officials, clergy and imams.

h. Last, but not least, education of parents.

Media, on the other hand, could have a very positive role in bridging differences and in fostering tolerance and respect. However, the media can also play a very negative role, through sharpening differences, deepening fault lines or streotyping certain vulnerable groups. We have seen examples of such coverage in the recent past. As participants may wish to address issues related to the media in more depth, at this stage I will confine myself to these general observations.